

CRISIS INTERVENTION IN THE LOCAL CONGREGATION
Reflections of a Denominational Executive

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of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by
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ABSTRACT

Crisis ministry by the minister of a congregation is a well-known and accepted task. Less is known about the methodologies and theories of crisis ministry with congregations by a denominational executive. The care of congregations is entrusted to the denominational executive, but little has been done to provide direction or resources for the task.

This essay explores the question of crisis intervention with congregations by examining the elements of a crisis, proposing definition of "intervention", and suggesting a methodology for intervention. Case studies of two congregations are presented: a helpless congregation and a rigid congregation.

One area of exploration applies insights from Family Systems therapy to the extended family situation of the local church. Comparisons of a closed family system and a closed congregational system offers suggestions for reframing the assumptions and systems of the congregation. The suggested approach of a Listening Conference as a model for offering aid to a troubled congregation implies giving theological significance to listening as a way of ministering.

Helplessness, as a psychological state and a congregational condition, results in a paralysis that eventually

means decline. Chapter Five explores the story of a helpless congregation and its process of movement towards health.

INTRODUCTION

Ministry to individuals in crisis has long been seen as one of the expected tasks of a local pastor. Few ministers have been spared the late-night phone call, the request for aid from a family or an individual in the face of bereavement, disaster, or some other kind of crisis. There is literature available to aid the minister in meeting the needs of the person or family in crisis. Agencies exist for referral. The local church pastor knows what to do and where to turn in most crisis situations.

The denominational executive with a regional assignment, the one who is entrusted with the denomination's episcopae, or spiritual oversight of the churches, is in a different situation. For the bishop or the regional or conference minister, the guidelines are less clear and the agencies for referral almost nonexistent. The denominational executive must be able to aid congregations in crisis in the same manner that local pastors must offer some aid to individuals or families in crisis. However, the task is more complex and the structures are less clear for the denominational executive.

An additional difficulty lies in the fact that denominational structures and politics vary greatly. A hierarchical denomination with a highly connected system will

have an easier time with congregations in crisis than the denomination that operates under a more open, congregationally autonomous system. If the denominational executive has the authority to move the pastor to another church or make sure that the pastor does not move, the task will be very different than the task of the denominational executive working under a system of congregational autonomy.

This paper will address the issues facing the denominational executive in the congregationally autonomous system. The difficulties of the system itself, a discussion of crisis and crisis ministry, examination of two kinds of troubled congregations, and suggestions for treatment will be included in this project. Case studies of congregations will be used where appropriate.

CHAPTER ONE

CRISIS AND CRISIS MINISTRY

Crisis is defined by Howard Stone as "an internal reaction to an external hazard."¹ The word "hazard" implies that there is danger present, thus making crisis a normal reaction to threat or challenge. Most uses of the word call to mind death, a natural disaster, or some other uncontrollable event. However, research of recent years has posited the understanding of crisis as not only an external event, but also an internal process. A popular example of this thinking is Gail Sheehey's book Passages, which examines "predictable crises of adult life" as natural developmental processes.² Crisis then can be understood as either a situational crisis, one predicated by an event, or a developmental one, which is a crisis that occurs as natural development gives rise to the need for change.³

In the life of a congregation, either type of crisis may occur. The building may burn down or the minister may have a heart attack: those are situational crises. On the other hand, the congregation may experience decline which debilitates its resources and leadership to the point that continuing on is a serious problem. That is a developmental crisis. Often a congregation may experience a problem which

is perceived to be a situational crisis. A good example of this would be an intense disagreement within the congregation which threatens to split the church in half. While this may be experienced by the church as situational crisis, that is, a specific event in the life of the church which is threatening and "hazardous", it is possible that in fact it is the result of a poorly-navigated developmental crisis. The example of a family going through divorce is a useful comparison here. The divorce might be perceived by the family members as a situational crisis, an event that occurs in time. In fact, the divorce is a symptom of a crisis in the life of one of the partners, a midlife crisis, perhaps. In like manner, congregations often experience as situational a crisis which is actually a symptom of a developmental crisis that has never been resolved.

Developmental theory in the adult life cycle has been studied and examined from a psychological and moral perspective.⁴ Developmental theory in the congregational life cycle has been examined for the most part by church growth experts who attempt to explain how it is that churches grow and /or decline. C. Peter Wagner of the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Church Growth proposes a bell-shaped curve describing the typical life cycle of a congregation.

If the vertical axis (of a bell curve drawn on graph paper) is church membership, and the horizontal axis is

time, the typical pattern will look like a bell. The usual configuration is as follows: (1) Rapid growth. This is the upcurve on the left hand side of the bell; (2) Plateau. This is when the curve begins to form the top of the bell; (3) Decline. This is the right hand side of the bell on its downward curve; (4) Stagnation. Finally the curve flattens out at a low membership figure, and the church learns simply how to survive. After that, a disease such as ethnikitis might set in and finish off the church.⁵

Recently Carl George, also of the Fuller Institute, has added an additional category of Renewal to that list, which would begin the bell curve all over again.⁶ While determining development strictly by numbers is not a complete method in examining the health of a congregation, it is useful to keep the Wagner/George categories in mind. The cycles of church life differ from human life cycles in one major way: churches have some control over their cycles. Or, at least, they CAN have if they choose or if they get help at significant times. That is to say, the decline and despair of many congregations, which previously been thought inevitable, can be stopped or reversed. The denominational executive can be a key element in the congregation's successful navigation of a developmental crisis such as decline.

Crisis ministry has some unique and identifiable factors. First, it always involves an intervention of some kind. The intervention means that the minister or the denominational executive will become a part of the process of change and improvement, rather than just seeing the various

parties in an office setting for counseling. Intervention probably means "going to the scene" and becoming involved with the congregation or individuals.

Crisis ministry almost always includes an invitation to become a part of the process, an invitation to intervene. This invitation may be direct, as in a telephone call requesting aid, or indirect. The indirect invitation is called "a cry for help", and will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

END NOTES

¹Howard W. Stone, Crisis Counseling (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976) p. 5.

²Gail Sheehy, Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life (New York: Dutton, 1974)

³Stone, p. 5.

⁴See Gail Sheehy, and also the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, Carol Gilligan, and James Fowler for discussions of moral development in the individual.

⁵C. Peter Wagner, Your Church Can Be Healthy (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979) p. 113.

⁶Carl George, Lecture in "How to Plant a Church" seminar, Charles E. Fuller Institute of Church Growth, Pasadena, 27 November 1984.

CHAPTER TWO

INTERVENTION AND THE CRY FOR HELP

For the denominational executive, intervention into the life of a troubled congregation is a moral imperative. Those who are entrusted with the spiritual care and oversight of congregations must be willing to make themselves available to those congregations when they are in need. There is a great deal of executive busy work possible to distract the denominational executive from the work of caring for the congregations, but the congregation must be a high priority of the executive, just as the individual or family must be a high priority for the local church pastor. This is not to imply that the executive should be at the congregations' beck and call, but that adequate staffing occur to insure that congregations which are in need can get help. It may not be the top executive on the denominational staff who cares for the congregations, but that person is responsible for making sure there is someone available if needs occur.

Congregations are a denomination's greatest asset and greatest opportunity for outreach to others; if they are left wanting, the denomination's strength will eventually be undermined. This is the practical imperative for the care of congregations; the moral one is one of responsibility. The

past two decades have been hard ones for the local church, and the decline in numbers of the mainline denominations is indicative of that difficulty. It is now an urgent situation: congregations that were started by denominations and then left to their own devices must be nurtured and enabled to grow once again. Denominations can no longer afford to take their most valuable resource for granted, and must be continually called into accountability to care for their congregations.

Intervention, then, is not a choice for the denominational executive. When a congregation asks for help, help must be given. It should be noted here that the help offered will not always be the help requested; as in therapy, the initial request for aid or treatment often masks the real needs of the situation. It should be clear, then, that responding to the request for aid will not necessarily mean doing exactly what the congregation requests. But aid must be offered, and attempts must be made, even if they are not what the congregation bargained for when it asked for help.

To say that a congregation does not ask for what it needs when requesting help is not a perjorative statement about congregations. It is rather to recognize that a congregation in crisis, perhaps in severe decline, may not have any idea about its potential or its possibilities for the

future. In the same manner that a severely depressed individual does not have a clear sense about his or her own strengths and capabilities, a declining congregation or a congregation in crisis will have difficulty envisioning a future that is brighter than the present.

In the previous chapter it was stated that a congregation's request for help may be direct or indirect. The direct request for help will be in the form of an invitation to the denominational executive to meet with the minister or with some of the leaders of the church; it might be a request to lead a retreat for planning or for spiritual renewal. Whatever the content of the invitation, it is clear that the congregation is consciously requesting time and attention.

Often in situations of severe crisis, the request for help will be indirect. Many times the more severe the crisis, the less direct the cry for help will be. At some point, however, everyone who is in deep pain makes some noise about it somewhere. It is this noise that gives the denominational executive the clue that help is needed by the congregation. John Savage, a United Methodist minister and church consultant writing about dropout church members, was one of the first to identify these noises of pain as "cries for help". The cry for help is unconscious and by nature indirect. In describing the cry for help as it appears while

an individual is in the process of dropping out of the church, Savage says:

The (dropout) track always begins with some anxiety provoking event. The events are usually triggered by personal relationships, i.e., the pastor or another church member, or a member of the family.... When the anxiety level becomes too great to tolerate, active church members will give verbal signals for others to hear. If there is no response, the signals will come in the form of anger.... As long as there is a chance for resolution of the anxiety, persons will remain active. When there is no resolution and the anxiety-anger levels become too great to tolerate, active church members will change their behavior patterns. This is noted in worship attendance, committee meetings, and dropping out of religious language. These behaviors become another clue to the community with the hope that someone will notice they are extracting themselves from the church.¹

The cry for help, then, is an unconscious set of verbalizations and behaviors designed to call attention to the fact that someone is in the process of leaving the church. Congregations also exhibit the tendency to issue an unconscious cry for aid when they are in pain. A cry for help from a congregation might reach a denominational executive in any or all of the following ways:

- a number of anonymous phone calls or letters complaining about a particular pastor
- sudden discontinuing of the church newsletter
- the resignation of the pastor and/or prominent laypersons from denominational committees
- dramatic decrease in denominational support monies

- inappropriate verbal anger or frustration from pastor or church members exhibited at denominational meetings
- "third party" reports ("I'm not supposed to tell you this, but...")

Once the cries for help have been received and decoded, the denominational executive has a number of options. It should be noted here, however, that since denominational executives are busy and usually weary of conflict to begin with, these unconscious behaviors that are invitational in nature often have opposite effect: they make people want to get as far away as possible. Earlier statements about the moral imperative of congregational care stand here as well. The denominational executive who hears the cry for help must respond. (There are, unfortunately, denominational executives who do not hear the cries for help, or, perhaps, who choose not to hear them.)

Options for response consist of finding the best way to let the congregation or pastor know that the message, the request for help, has been received. This could be done by telephoning the pastor or a prominent layperson with a general inquiry: "How are things going out there?" Another method would be to arrange to be in the neighborhood and "just drop by". Or, an informal note written to the pastor ("Just thinking about you and hoping that everything is all

right,") is a good first step in indicating that you have heard the cry for help.

END NOTES

¹John Savage, The Bored and Apathetic Church Member
(Pittsford, NY: L.E.A.D. Consultants, 1974) pp. 68-69.

CHAPTER THREE

FAMILY SYSTEMS THERAPY: HELP FOR THE RIGID CONGREGATION

Earlier chapters have established that the task of the denominational executive is, at least in part, to insure and facilitate the health of the institutions and organizations entrusted to that person's care. In many cases, this means the care and nurture of congregations. While there are ways of assisting congregations in the various tasks and ministries that they need to perform, the processes are less clear when the issue is not task but identity. When a congregation is in trouble and needs some assistance, it is the responsibility of the denominational executive to make him or herself available to assist.

This chapter will address a specific approach that the denominational executive can use in beginning the process of treating the troubled congregation. While not a therapeutic manual or treatment plan, it is rather an extended comparison between the issues facing a troubled congregation and the issues and methodologies of the Family Systems model of therapy. There are many helpful parallels between a family in trouble and a congregation in trouble, and it therefore follows that a therapy which is useful in treating a family will also be useful in treating a congregation.

The parallel between the congregation and the family is not a new one. In Preaching and Worship in the Small Church, authors William Williamson and Robert Wilson point out that a small congregation functions in much the same way as an extended family.¹ In fact, many small congregations ARE extended families. When the congregation characterizes itself and its strengths in this manner, the denominational executive or consultant is likely to discover a closed family system in operation. In the closed church, it is almost impossible for newcomers to join and be easily absorbed into the community. The family model is just too strong for that to happen. As Williams and Wilson note, there are only three ways to become a part of a family: to be born into it, to marry in, or to be adopted.² Congregations, like families, tend to be most selective about who they adopt. When a small congregation bemoans the fact that it is not growing, or that people will visit but "they just drift away", it is very possible that the congregation has an unwritten exclusivity clause in their adoption policies.

The lack of growth and the resulting problems of financial and leadership scarcity can be a main reason for a congregation's request for help from a denominational executive. It is important not to be seduced by the symptom and deal exclusively with some "how-to's" of church growth too

quickly. It is likely the case that the poor growth is a symptom of a closed system. Virginia Satir defines a closed family system as one in which individual self-worth is low, communication indirect, rules rigid and non-negotiable, and the link to society fearful, placating, and blaming.³ Certainly there are congregations that function in the same way.

It is useful to pause and consider how it is that a congregation becomes a closed system. Congregations do not begin with the intention of being closed, rigid, and blaming; but, in the course of a congregation's life, these characteristics may emerge. Both the literature of the church consulting field and the family systems field are helpful in understanding why.

Church growth literature of recent years lifts up the fact that many congregations are begun by denominations in such a manner that the congregation is hampered and inhibited from the start. One might assume that a congregation would be hindered by a lack of funds and support from the denomination, but in fact, research shows that the opposite is the case.⁴ Though a congregation will benefit from support in its first few years of existence, that support has diminishing returns after a few years. If kept on support for too long, the congregation will never develop stewardship patterns of its own; the church will be like a young person

who never left home. Certain factors within the church's life, such as a sense of identity and mission, a direction, a sense of purpose, will not mature.

There are also congregations which are able to mature to a point, and then the development stops. The strategies for functioning which were once most effective are no longer so effective, and the congregation must develop new strategies for its life, or it will stagnate and eventually decline. Many congregations are effective at developing new strategies for ministry and survival, and thus are constantly evolving and growing. The congregation that does not evolve will continue to use outdated and ineffective means of functioning in the face of a changing world and church.

The congregation that is unable to change compares to the rigid family in family systems language. This description of the rigid family helps focus the issues of the rigid congregation:

In rigid families the passage from one evolutionary stage to the next may be perceived as catastrophic. The necessity for change becomes transmuted into the adopting of a known solution, applied in the present and "programmed" for the future. The family is closed to any experimentation and new learning. A solution which had served in one phase is rigidly applied in others.⁵

A congregation, in its early years of existence, may develop strategies for caring for its members. These strategies may include the formation of church school classes which

are age level groupings. This approach, in the early years, insures that newcomers have a place to enter the community and will be immediately placed with persons whose life journey most closely resembles their own. This age-level class approach worked very well in bringing the congregation together and mainstreaming newcomers into a place that would be likely to meet their needs.

Perhaps, after a decade or so, the nature of the community surrounding the congregation began to change. The church found itself in a neighborhood where members were not comfortable coming in at night, and the image of the congregation as a friendly, neighborhood church was no longer appropriate. To be effective and minister to the community, the congregation would need to reach out to the people in the area with some programmatic events that would meet their needs. Instead of changing their approach to ministry and program, however, the congregation continues to rigidly expect everyone to join the age groups which were established for newcomers ten years ago. The existing groups are no longer an effective program tool, they no longer do what they were created to do, but the congregation refuses to give them up or even to redefine their function.

While the above may not seem like a major crisis in the life of a congregation, it does represent a mentality

that is rigid and unchanging. Instead of finding new methods for programming, the congregation steadfastly holds on to something that worked well in one setting and expects it to work well in all settings. Very many of these instances in the life of one congregation leads to an inexorable decline and in some cases the paralysis of the organization. Ministry is no longer the agenda; survival is.

The family in a rigid system will often choose a scapegoat from among its members. This individual takes on the ineffectiveness of the household and becomes what is known as the identified patient. The identified patient is useful to the rigid family because all of the attention and all of the requests for help can be focused on one individual without exposing the system. Once the system has been in place for some time, it functions to guard against change, since change is the one thing the family cannot face. In the case of the congregation above, the resistance to do anything about the programmatic changes needed was at first an inability to respond to change, but eventually insured that change would not be necessary. The system is something to be protected, because it keeps the family -- or the congregation -- from having to deal with change.

The identified patient preserves the system of the rigid family and protects against change. In a congregation,

the identified patient does the same thing: provides a focus for the resistance to change and a scapegoat for all the ills of the congregation. There are differences, however. In a rigid family the identified patient remains the same; that role does not shift around within the family.⁶ In a congregation, the identified patient may change. It might be the minister, a past minister who made a bad decision or at least a decision that did not prove effective twenty years later, or it might even be the community surrounding the church. Unless the identified patient is an individual within the congregation, it is not likely that the same physical or psychological symptoms will occur that do occur for the identified patient of a family. In that sense the comparison is not exact. But the function within the system is the same: to guard against change.

In the family system, the identified patient will be the reason for seeking treatment. Depending on the nature of the family and what needs to be protected, the symptoms of the identified patient will vary. In one case the identified patient might be anorectic, in another severely depressed, in another schizophrenic. When the family brings in the identified patient for treatment, the therapist must treat the system under which the family is operating rather than the symptoms presented by the identified patient. It is

important not to deal too directly with solving the problems and trying to cure the symptoms. Instead it is more useful to observe the system and begin to imagine how to change the system.⁷

As has already been mentioned, this approach is useful in working with the rigid congregation as well. A request for help in curing the congregation's problem of inability to grow, for example, will in many cases arrive set up for failure. The denominational executive schedules a programmatic workshop or training event to treat the symptom; that is, to give the congregation the information it needs in order to be able to grow. Upon arrival and throughout the training event the executive or consultant will be greeted with "yes, but." "Yes, we know that might work but we can't do that here." "Yes, that probably is effective in some congregations but let me explain to you why we can't possibly do that." Like some families, the congregation has issued a request that the denominational executive help them to "move while standing still".⁸ The congregation has in effect said "Make us better, but don't make us change."

In order to deal with this situation, the denominational executive must find a way to expose the system and bring it out into the open so that it can be examined and perhaps altered. This is not an easy task, because all of the

resources of the congregation are focused on protecting the system and insuring against change.

It will not be as possible in a programmatic event such as a church growth workshop to deal with the systemic aspect of the congregation's life. It will be possible in that setting, however, to begin to introduce new language and new understandings about the church and its life. If there are people within the system who are suffering under it, they will hear your message.

This is the approach that United Methodist minister John Savage takes in his workshops with congregations. The stated purpose for the event is to train congregations to call on dropout, or inactive church members. A rigid congregation could enter that workshop and discover all kinds of ways to subvert the process or resist the learnings. But within the workshop, Savage continually presents information about the congregation and its life that changes the way people see the church. For example, instead of saying, "The church should be loving and open to everyone who comes in," Savage will likely say something like: "A congregation can always find ways to get rid of the people it doesn't want or that make it uncomfortable."⁸

This language is so foreign to the way most laypersons and even most clergy talk about the church that it

shocks the hearer into a new way of understanding. It catches the protected system off guard and may open the way to new learning. An extremely rigid system will be able to muster its protective forces and guard against the new information, but some persons within the system who are hurting will hear the message and begin to see the congregation in a different light. Those persons will be very likely to make contact with the leader of the event (in this case, John Savage; in a denominational event, the executive present) and ask for some help.

In the example used above, Savage is making use of a technique that many family systems therapists have found useful. The technique is called REFRAMING.⁹ Reframing is a way of refocusing or redefining the situation so that the system is caught off guard and new strategies may be introduced. In Savage's reframe, the definition of the problem of church growth shifts from "people don't want to join our church" to "we can get rid of anyone who threatens to come in and change us." This technique is effective in a number of ways.

First, and most importantly, it changes the congregational role from passive to active. The congregation is the subject of the sentence rather than "the people". In the new frame, the congregation is in control of the action,

and it is at their pleasure whether the congregation grows or not. Secondly, it is revealed that the congregation may have something to lose by growing. This insight has not come to conscious understanding for many congregations, and its introduction will be useful in shifting the congregation's view of its own actions. Since many congregations in decline view themselves as helpless, the shift to active status is an agent for change.

The next step, after the reframing has been introduced, heard by a few persons who are in pain because of the system operating in the congregation, and help has been requested, is to establish a means for treating the congregation. This is often accomplished by scheduling a Listening Conference. The Listening Conference can have many purposes, but in one of its forms it can serve as the therapeutic intervention by the denominational executive.

Briefly, the Listening Conference is a scheduled event in the life of the congregation in which one or two denominational executives or consultants meet with small groups to explore the congregation's needs and future. Typically the church members will sign up for one-hour sessions in groups of ten to fifteen. Roughly a third of those present on Sunday morning will choose to participate. (In situations of severe conflict or in very small

congregations, this percentage will be much higher.)

The sign-up process is the first place for the consultant to observe the system at work. It is useful to notice how persons group themselves, at what point during the day they choose to come, and who talks first within the session. Each one-hour session, with the consultant(s) and ten to fifteen church members, will be structured around a few questions. Examples of these questions are: "What is the best thing about this church?"; "What is the worst thing about this church?"; "What should this church be doing in ten years?"; and "If you could change anything right now, what would you change?"

After several sessions, a pattern will begin to emerge. It will be clear that there is official agreement about most of the items discussed. Useful information is present in the content of the discussions, but often most interesting to the family systems consultant is the process and the system that is operating. In the first few moments of the session, it will be clear whether the congregation operates on a closed or an open system. If an open system is present, the consultant can focus primarily on the content of the sessions. If an closed system is present, a great deal of attention must be focused on the interactions themselves. It is tempting to want to problem-solve the symptoms of the

congregation, but that will not be productive in the long run for a closed system. Getting distracted by the content will prevent the consultant from seeing the more significant interactions and viewing the system in operation.¹⁰

A practical consideration should be noted at this point. The consultant will be spending at least one day meeting with congregational groups, and will be hearing a great deal of material as well as observing a myriad of interactions. If there are two consultants, they should alternate between leading the sessions and taking notes during the sessions.¹¹ If a consultant is working alone, a tape recorder is essential. It is impossible to record the content and observe the systemic interaction at the same time.

Proponents of short-term or brief therapeutic interventions might argue that the Listening Conference model takes too much time and does not have returns that are immediate enough to justify the expenditure of time and energy. There is some merit to these concerns, but the nature of the congregational organization requires a different approach than a family does. A congregation is a large group of people with a leadership corps and an employed leader of leaders. Anyone of those factors or elements can subvert the move towards health and change if they do not buy in to the

process. The Listening Conference takes steps to insure a wide ownership of the move towards change by the sign-up stage of things. Persons sign up to attend, plan the event, and participate once they are there. The congregational leaders are involved through structuring the event and providing for consultant's meals, etc., as well as participating in small groups. The person with the least to do during the Listening Conference is the minister, but this is also useful, since it gives the minister an opportunity to not control something in the congregation's life. Often there is very little that happens in the life of the congregation that the minister does not have a hand in; the Listening Conference reframes the minister's role for at least a day by taking her or him out of the driver's seat.

After the sessions have been completed, it is useful for the consultant(s) to spend a half an hour or so with the pastoral leadership of the congregation to share early impressions of the congregation and its process. This does a few important things: brings the minister back into the process, builds anticipation for the consultant's report and suggestions, and either eases or intensifies the minister's anxieties about the possibilities of change in the congregation.

Some church consultants believe that the report

should be received by the congregation immediately. Typically the consultant's report will summarize the content of the sessions and make observations about the system observed; offer reflections on the above, and make suggestions about the congregation's future directions. Receiving the report quickly is like getting a test back the day after it has been administered: immediate feedback. More productive for the systemic change, however, is a longer interval before the report is received. Family systems therapists tend to agree that a long interval should occur between sessions with a family in order for the system to be affected. If the sessions are too close together, they only serve to create a new system which includes the therapist as well as the family.¹²

The Listening Conference itself--the day or more of meeting in small groups to gather information and observe the system--is comparable to the first therapy session with a family. The receiving of the report corresponds to the second session. If these events are too close together, they will be absorbed into the system of the congregation. Waiting at least a month before sending the report insures that the system will be kept off balance by the anticipation of the minister and the church leaders. By the time the report arrives, the system has lost some of its power and its hold

on the congregation. The experience of the day of sessions has had an opportunity to work some changes, and the congregation has already begun to function as its own therapist. Often, the greater the urging of the congregation to receive the report as soon as possible, the more out of balance their system has become. Delaying gives a chance for the lack of balance to do its work in disturbing the system.

The content of the report is less important than the process of the sessions and the interval between the sessions and the receiving of the report. In fact, in some cases the report's suggestions will seem redundant or "after the fact" because the process of change has already begun and some of the suggestions the report will make are already in place. The denominational executive needs to be clear about his or her own task in order to have the freedom to delay the report, and the confidence to send a report which will not always gladden the hearts of the minister and the church leaders. The report, though useful, is the least important part of the process when the congregation's system is a closed one. (This is not the case in situations where the purpose of the Listening Conference is solely to plan program or decide whether or not to build a new building. Those Listening Conferences have very different functions.)

In some instances the delaying of the report has the

effect of escalating conflict within the congregation. This is useful in the same way that staging a crisis in a family therapy session is useful: it breaks down the protective defenses that the rigid system has mustered to ward off the possibility of change.¹³

CASE STUDY: CONGREGATION A

Congregation A is a small congregation in a residential area. The city is a mid-sized agricultural-turned-industrial community in Southern California. The congregation has operated within an extremely rigid system for the past three decades of its life. The congregation is sixty-five years old, and for the past two decades has had a series of two to five-year pastorates.

The congregation's peak occurred in the mid-1950's when attendance averaged 250 in church and 175 in church school. Church school attendance is currently around 35 and worship attendance hovers around 60.

The congregation is a rigid system with three subsystems: the Sunday worship, the women's fellowship group, and the choir. In some ways, the subsystems enjoy warm and supportive relationships. Typical of the small church, they function as sibling groups within a family: territorial, closed to intruders, and defensive about their own boundaries.

The church requested a Listening Conference in order to "Get us to go somewhere." The possibility of change had been introduced by the coming of a new minister who did not immediately fit into one of the three sibling groups and had begun to attempt to develop new groups while trying to nourish and encourage the existing groups. Conflict ensued over the new people and new groups, and decisions such as firing the nursery attendant hired to care for the children of the new people began to communicate to the newcomers that they were not wanted. The people attending the Listening Conference were almost entirely from the original subsystems with the exception of one couple who had joined some weeks back and came the first session of the Listening Conference.

The participants' comments regarding the question "What is the best thing about this church?" were almost universal in their agreement. The responses, from 60 people in four sessions, were:

"Everyone knows everyone."

"We are just like a family."

"I have been here all of my life."

"We all love each other."

"These people are my brothers and sisters."

"We are a friendly and caring church."

It was clear from the responses that the system was

wrapped up rather tightly. The newcomers responded to the "friendly and caring" statement with agreement, but they did not say "People are friendly and caring to us." They said "People really seem to care for each other."

One of the most interesting series of responses came when the participants were asked what they would change about the church. In response, they described in exact detail what the congregation had been thirty years ago. There was no awareness of this: they thought they were projecting towards the future. The community surrounding the church building was nothing like it was three decades ago; the church members no longer lived in walking distance of the church; the elements of church life that were effective tools for ministry during the congregation's peak were in serious decline; but the responses unconsciously described the congregation as it was in its successful days. A textbook example of rigidity: an inability to learn new strategies and a thoughtless clinging to the "overlearned solution."¹⁴

The experience of the day of sessions was in itself a radical change of behavior for the congregation. People came to clearly defined sessions; the few leaders who had been in control of the church for generations were participants in sessions just like everyone else. One of them requested sitting in on all the sessions, and when this was denied, he

attended his session, participated well, and meekly went home. At the sessions, the subsystems were inadvertently broken up and new combinations formed. The reframing of the system had begun.

The consultant waited two and a half months before sending the report. It was clear from communications with the congregation that the system was out of balance. During the first month, urgent communications stated "We really need that report." During the second month, communications threatened "If we don't get it pretty soon we will have to proceed without your suggestions." During the interval between the second communication and the sending of the report, the minister called to say that the congregation had sponsored a holiday event for the children of the neighborhood with seventy-five local children in attendance. They were planning to set up a Latch Key program for after school hours for those children, which is now in place and flourishing. When the report was finally received, the congregation sent a thank you note stating "It was interesting, but we were already doing most of it anyway." Exactly.

Change for the rigid congregation does not always come so easily or quickly. But when the solutions of the past have begun to prevent the meeting of the needs of the people, and the protective systems can be disturbed and unbalanced,

change can occur. The use of a family systems model gives denominational executives an opportunity to ease the suffering of a congregation that has been dedicated to preserving the past at the expense of the ministries and people of the present and future. Other methodologies beyond the Listening Conference may be developed by persons interested in this approach, but it appears that the Listening Conference as described in these pages has close connection to the therapeutic intervention of a family systems therapist working with a rigid family. Offering assistance and comfort to the family of God by unbalancing a rigid system is a creative and caring response to the requests to help a congregation "move while standing still."¹⁵

END NOTES

¹William H. Williamson and Robert H. Wilson, Preaching and Worship in the Small Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980) p. 79.

²Ibid.

³Virginia Satir, Peoplemaking (Palo Alto: Science and Behavior Books, 1972) pp. 3-4.

⁴Peter Wagner, lecture in "How To Plant a Church" seminar, Charles E. Fuller Institute for Church Growth, Pasadena, 27 November 1984.

⁵Maurizio Andolfi, et al., Behind the Family Mask (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1983) p. 13.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Richard Bandler and John Grindler, Reframing (Moab, UT: Real People Press, 1982) p. 167.

⁸John Savage, lecture during "Reunion Training Lab," Whittier, CA, 30 October 1979.

⁹Bandler and Grindler, p. 167 and throughout.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 167.

¹¹Harold Watkins, President of the Board of Church Extension of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), personal letter to the author, 13 August 1983.

¹²Stephen J. Schultz, Family Systems Therapy (New York: Aronson, 1984) p. 232.

¹³Andolfi, et al., p. 42.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 18.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SECOND SESSION: THE LISTENING CONFERENCE REPORT

The previous chapter discussed the delaying of the report to the rigid congregation in order that the system might be left out of balance for a period of time. This has proved to be a useful tool and the experience of its use fits in well with the theories of Family Systems therapy. One of the aspects of the systemic approach cautions the therapist not to get too distracted by the content of the sessions, because it is the system that is of concern.

When working with congregations, the same concerns apply. However, it is necessary at some point to deal directly with the content of the crisis or situation. Without some attention to content, the denominational executive is not being responsible to the overall task of helping the congregation move towards health. One of the things that the congregation is likely to need is information about itself from a caring but fairly unbiased source. The problem is that often congregations get nothing but information, with no attention to the possible systemic aspects of their life together. The caution to not be seduced into spending all of one's time on content does not mean that content is unimportant. Congregations need useful information. The

Listening Conference Report, which functions therapeutically as a second session, is the means to communicate some of that information. A delay in the receiving of the report helps guard against problem-solving too early in the process. But once the system has had a period of time to lose its balance, the content of the report can be useful. An example, based on the congregation described above, follows.

REPORT OF LISTENING CONFERENCE CONGREGATION A

The congregation met in a Listening Conference with consultants on September 29, 1984. The day consisted of four small group sessions of between ten and fifteen participants each, plus the consultants. During these sessions, participants shared their feelings about the church and their hopes for its future. In addition, consultants met briefly at the beginning and ending of the day with the pastor, and enjoyed midday and evening meals with groups of parishoners. Consultants found the preparations for the day by the church and minister to be most impressive and well organized.

Nature of Report

This report will be in three sections. The first section will summarize what the consultants heard about the congregation from its members: strengths, weaknesses, and hopes for the future. These will be reflected according to how strongly a sentiment was expressed. If many people said it, it will appear in the report. If only one person felt a certain way, that will not likely be reported. In some cases, direct quotes will be used if the statement accurately summarizes a feeling expressed by many people. Comments are listed in random order and are not prioritized.

The second section of the report will consist of consultants' reflections on the participants' statements about the church. The final section will be the recommendations of the consultants for the future of the congregation and its life together.

Section 1: What the Consultants Heard

Strengths of the Church

- Warm and friendly people
- Excellent leadership
- Cohesive, kind people
- "This is my family" (Expressed by many people)
- The friendliness and warmth of the people
- "I feel at home here"
- Great choir
- Departments are working together, pulling together
- We have a great minister (Strong appreciation for current leadership was expressed by a great number)
- Prayer list is good
- Women's groups strong
- Our minister is a strong leader - we have needed that
- Facilities adequate for our needs
- Worship experience good
- Study groups

- All-church camp

Weaknesses of the Church

- Need help in reaching new people
- Don't have anything to hold young families
- Need programs for children and youth
- Church attendance poor ("Sometimes there are more people in the choir than in the congregation!")
- Need more times to get to know new people - coffee hour every week
- Church needs more visibility in the community
- We need a youth minister to help us attract young people
- No calling on visitors; they just drift away
- Leadership tired; there aren't enough of us to do everything anymore
- Communications system is poor
- Financial situation too tight
- Can't hear in the sanctuary
- "Our children's programs are hampered by the school's presence, but we can't kick them out; we need the money."

Hopes for the Future

- More young families

- Move the school out and get our building back
- More people like us
- A visible sign outside
- To be "just a little bigger, just enough to make life easier"
- An executive committee or some smaller group for decision making

Section 2: Reflections on Participants' Comments

The congregation is a warm, caring group of people who are more like a family in their functioning than a congregation. Many of the comments during the Listening Conference supported this, and it is what many people like most about the congregation. On the surface this would appear to be no problem, except that the resources and the size of the congregation make new people a necessity for smooth running of the church. It is also the stated desire of the congregation and the minister for the church to grow. The two factors--the desire for growth and the desire to hold on to the intimate, family feeling--are in competition with one another.

For the church to grow in any appreciable sense, changes in the life of the congregation will have to be made. Groups that have been the center of the congregation will

have to give way to new groups, for new people need new groups in which to be involved. The close, family feeling will be diminished. In fact, it is the consultants' opinion that the church has not grown because the members instinctively sense that they would have to give up some of what they prize so highly--their system of operating as a family--in order to do so. Though the church says it wants new members, it only appears to want enough of them to "make life easier for us", one participant commented. Evangelism which is aimed at the survival of the institution rather than the sharing of faith is not often very successful.

The congregation is also suffering from what the consultants call "Single Cell Anemia". That is, there are not enough entry points for new people to make contact with the church. The entry points that exist: choir, the worshipping congregation, women's groups and a study group; have been in existence as a body so long that they are not useful as evangelistic tools. They provide nurture for the people who are in them, but new structures need to be created for new people to enter.

The congregation appears to be optimistic about its future and believes that it has something of value to share. Consultants agree; there is much of value in the congregation's life together. The task that needs to be accomplished

is a planned "opening up" of the structures of church life, so that at every point, new people can be welcomed. The result of this will not only be added members to bring new life into the church, but the experience of greater freedom and revitalized life for the ongoing members. When a church begins to grow after years of decline, members often find their own faith renewed and strengthened. This is definitely a possibility for this congregation.

Section 3: Recommendations for the Future

1. Consultants recommend that a survey of the area be done to determine existing needs. This can be done rather informally, in order to get in touch with the surrounding community, which has begun to grow. Programming can then be developed to respond to felt needs. This enhances the church's ministry by reaching out to people according to their needs instead of according to what we happen to be offering this week.

2. Consultants recommend that the congregation undertake some leadership training in order that new leaders may be trained and current leaders may be empowered. A program of leader development should include participation in denominational events such as the Church Leader's Conference in the spring of 1985, and congregational training such as the Order of Andrew.

3. Consultants further recommend that the congregation call in an education consultant to advise about use of buildings, children's classrooms, etc. Members of the Regional Committee on Adult Nurture are available for such services. In addition, consulting with Ira Hall (at Loch Leven) about building rental costs and outside group use is recommended in order to determine what should be done about the school's rental of building space.

4. Consultants recommend that the congregation appoint a Long-Range Planning Committee to explore the congregation's future in greater detail. The congregation needs a group set aside to dream about the possibilities of the future, and to work towards making some of those dreams come true. The hopes need to be less short-sighted and more future-oriented. Consultants observed that when asked what the congregation should be like in ten years if one could wave a "magic wand", the responses described what the congregation had been three decades ago! The congregation has the potential for a bright future, not just a glowing past.

5. Consultants recommend that the congregation begin to work at ways to increase visibility from the street. With the building set back from the street in the way it is, it is not easy to find, even if you are looking for it. A new sign, a lighted sign, some landscaping on the field in front

to draw the eye to the church building... there are several options. The increase of visibility in the community by advertising in local media should be explored as well.

6. Finally, consultants strongly recommend that the congregation identify some short-term, realistic goals for the near future. A useful method would be to identify a target group for whom to plan ministry and program. The congregation needs to find its "specialty" for ministry and plan accordingly.

Concluding Thoughts

The consultants believe there is a great deal to praise in the life of the congregation. There is a feeling of optimism and freshness that indicates a desire for a new kind of life together. The real question for the congregation is whether or not the leaders and members are willing to give up some of the family feeling in order to be more open to newcomers. The congregation must consciously work at becoming an open, welcoming system rather than a closed, safe, comfortable one. That will mean changes, because all of the newcomers will not be "just like us". Change means risk, and losing some of what the congregation values. But it also means life and renewal for the church and, ultimately, for the family of God.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONFLICT AND THE HELPLESS CONGREGATION

Often the cry for help that reaches the denominational executive is from a congregation paralyzed by conflict. Conflict is something that occurs from time to time in any organization, family, or relationship. In congregations suffering from severe crisis, the conflict has rendered the congregation dysfunctional as an organization and as a church. Decision-making processes may be slowed down or at a standstill, survival or even a fortress mentality sets in. Change is not only the "hazard" mentioned in Chapter One, it is nearly impossible in the frozen situation of conflict.

The situation giving rise to the paralysis is difficult to predict. Just as one individual faces a difficult life experience with strength and courage while another seems to crumble under the pressure, so one congregation will weather a crisis or conflict with a minimum of problems while another will be immobilized by it. The clue to these different reactions lies in the issue of the developmental versus the situational crisis.

In a troubled congregation, a conflict which might occur without causing much of a stir in another place will

become the precipitating event to a full-blown crisis. One might be tempted to call that a situational crisis, since the precipitating event can be identified. However, what renders the congregation dysfunctional is not the conflict itself, but the fact that the conflict occurs on top of what is already a severe developmental crisis. In the rigid congregation, the church suffers from a case of "arrested development" by clinging to an overlearned solution and avoiding the hazard of change. The situation is similar for the helpless congregation, except that the helpless congregation is not aware of having ever had a solution, overlearned or otherwise.

In his 1974 study on helplessness, Martin E.P. Seligman defines helplessness as "the psychological state that frequently results when events are uncontrollable."¹ Helplessness occurs when an individual or organization believes that nothing can be done to change the circumstances that confront that person or group. When one is totally convinced that nothing can be done, one is not likely to do anything. The result of such a belief, then, is paralysis: total helplessness.

Helplessness comes from the belief that there is no control possible over one's life and destiny. How this occurs has been somewhat of a mystery, as persons view a

congregation which appears to have no idea what to do when faced with a problem or conflict. Seligman offers an intriguing possibility, a missing link in this exploration of the roots of helplessness.

In the introductory chapter of Helplessness, Seligman describes a person whom he calls the Golden Girl. She is a college student who during her high school years had a superb record of achievements: good grades, class offices, cheer-leading, etc. Mysteriously, though, by her sophomore year in college, helplessness had set in. Her grades had dropped to failing level, she had experimented and become bored with drugs, she felt filled with despair.²

In a later chapter, Seligman proposes that those whom he calls "golden youth" have extreme difficulty in navigating even minor developmental changes in their lives because they never learned the natural coping methods that people with a less charmed existence must learn. In fact, their early successes were not viewed as achievements, but were seen rather as an inheritance. Therefore:

I think the answer may lie in the lack of contingency between the actions of these students and the good things, as well as the negative events, that came their way. These reinforcers came about less through the efforts of the young individuals who benefited from them, than because our society is affluent. They have experienced a minimum of hard work followed by reward. From where does one get a sense of power, worth, and self-esteem? Not from what (he) one owns, but from long experience of watching (his) one's actions change the

world. ...I suggest that what produces self-esteem and a sense of competence and protects against depression, is not only the absolute quality of experience, but the perception that one's own actions controlled the experience. To the degree that uncontrollable events occur, either traumatic or positive, depression will be predisposed and ego strength undermined. To the degree that controllable events occur, a sense of mastery and resistance to depression will result.³

In much of congregational life, there are elements that are uncontrollable. The community surrounding the church may change. The society may change, resulting in a lower level of investment in religious activities. In fact, these things have happened over the past twenty-five years in many congregations. Some have adapted, some have made voluntary decisions to close or relocate or change their target population. Others have been frozen into helplessness. The explanation lies in the parallel between Seligman's "Golden Youth" and the golden age of church life, the late 1940's and all of the 1950's.

During those years and on into the mid-60's, churches in America were booming. In fact, the years of the postwar Baby Boom--1946 to 1964--were boom years for the church, too. In recalling those days now, a typical church member was heard to say: "All you had to do was open the doors, and the people would flock in."

Note the passive nature of that statement. Even though it was likely that churches worked hard to earn and

keep the flood of members and money that poured in in those days, the perception of the church was that it was a passive recipient of the numbers. Particularly for the churches that began during those years (and many denominations were starting great numbers of churches) or for churches that did not have a clear sense of direction beforehand, the golden years of church life distorted the congregation's perception of what it takes to "succeed." A sense of powerlessness about their achievements emerged. Churches had no perception of accomplishing the growth of those years. The people "just kept coming." The growth "just happened." Like Seligman's Golden Youth, the years of success generated not a sense of self-esteem and competence, but a sense of helplessness. When life and society began to change and the boom ended, these churches had no idea how to adapt and change with the times, because they had no idea how they succeeded in the first place.

Experiencing a disaster can also bring about helplessness. The disaster reaction is a numbness or paralysis that sets in for a limited period of time. Studies have indicated that persons or societies tend to function quite effectively in the midst of a disaster, but can fall apart after the disaster is over.⁴ The paralysis that follows a disaster is usually a time-related experience, in

other words, it will dissipate over time. But the helplessness that occurs is genuine enough, and has all of the difficulties mentioned above. Disasters are by nature uncontrollable incidents, and the more severe the disaster, the longer the helplessness will last. The connection with a congregation is easy to see in this case. The disaster of a loss of the building, the death of the pastor, the destruction of the neighborhood... any disaster that the congregation experiences collectively can engender helplessness.

Seligman notes that there are three symptoms of helplessness. The first has already been mentioned: it is motivational. When helplessness sets in, the motivation to try to effect change is lost, because the individual or organization believes that no contingency exists in relation to action. Because it is believed that nothing can be done, nothing is done.

The second symptom of helplessness is cognitive. Once a person "has had some experience with uncontrollability, [he] that person has difficulty learning that [his] response has succeeded, even when it is actually successful. Uncontrollability distorts the perception of control."⁵ A congregation, therefore, could be on its way to health and strength without being conscious or aware that that was

happening, and not sense any responsibility or take any credit for its increasing health.

The third symptom is emotional, and the most typical emotional response to helplessness is depression. In the case of a disaster, the depression takes the form of shock, and is likely to dissipate with time. The depressed congregation can either be in a temporary or a protracted state, depending on the precipitating factors. ⁶

Much of this discussion of helplessness has been rather abstract and theoretical. It is possible, however, to see the workings of helplessness in the story of a congregation. The congregational case study about to be discussed combines many of the elements from above: the "Golden Youth" theory as well as a response to disaster and some images of returning health.

CASE STUDY: CONGREGATION B

Congregation B is a "city church" in a declining urban area. It is a minority congregation. The church has a significant history and many of the members have been around since its inception. Some years ago the congregation was created by the merger of two previous congregations, and even in conversations today persons with history in the church will identify themselves as part of one of the original

groups. This has not been a major difficulty in the church's life, however; it seems rather to reflect the congregation's pride in all of the aspects of its beginnings.

For the first few decades of the church's life, the congregation experienced strong pastoral leadership of the parental style consistent with many minority congregations. Some of the later helplessness can be traced to this fact, since the church members themselves seemed to have had little sense of participating in the church's growth and accomplishments. The good things that happened were all perceived to be minister-related, rather than congregational, and the sense of contingency, or responsibility, was minimal. The pride in the church came from being a member of "Reverend So-and-So's church".

After that period of strong parental pastoral leadership, the church experienced a series of relatively short pastorates. The most recent of these was a young man of a rather charismatic nature, theologically and personally. He introduced a number of changes and attracted a large number of newcomers into the congregation. As a result, the congregation began to grow very rapidly, the style of worship changed drastically, and the place was almost unrecognizable to the "old-time" members. The worship style had changed, the people had changed, and those who had been in leadership

for years suddenly found themselves outside of the circles of power and influence. Though some of them remained officially in leadership, it was almost as though the new minister had created a parallel structure for church governance that excluded the older members. Tensions escalated over the months and finally the minister resigned and left to start a new church, taking all of the new members and a good number of the "old" members with him.

The remaining remnant is the congregation that the author has been working with. While there are many things to examine in the systemic happenings of this congregation's life, it is the helplessness that we are concerned with here. There is a great deal of pain and trauma that has been created by the split. Some families have members in both the new and the old congregation; one woman takes her children to the new church and then drives herself over to the original church for worship. Spouses go in opposite directions on Sunday morning. People that the older members taught in church school have denounced them as not truly Christian. All in all, the elements of disaster fit in well with the story of Congregation B.

For over a year after the split, the congregation was in shock. The numbness that can be seen in communities after a tornado or a fire prevailed in worship and in

meetings. Not only had the congregation gone through the disaster itself, but the whole experience seemed to have been uncontrollable. The old-time members sat and watched as the membership swelled and the church grew in size beyond their wildest dreams. Then, just as quickly, the crowds were gone. The experience was almost a microcosm of the fifties' "Golden Years" of the Protestant church.

Some relief from the pain and the numbness is beginning to happen. The more time that elapses, the more the congregation is able to discern some contingency or responsibility for the things that happened. Like the homeowner who views the shattered remains of her house and says "Guess I should have had earthquake insurance," the congregation is beginning to be aware of some responsibility for the split, and is eager to learn how to prevent something like that from happening again. We see by this that the congregation's reaction of helplessness was a disaster reaction, and the extensive cognitive disturbance was of a temporary nature.

The invitation to hold a Listening Conference came a full eighteen months after the split. The event of the Listening Conference itself was indicative of some ebbing of the paralysis and a desire to move forward. Much of the language of the participants' comments reflected this:

- "It's time for us to get on with it."

- "I'm tired of coming to church and feeling angry all of the time."

- "What I am starting to realize is that no one set out to hurt me, personally. I want to put it all behind me."

Another event in the life of the congregation that allowed them to begin finding their way out of the helplessness trap was something of an accident in itself. The congregation was asked to host a denominational event that typically draws hundreds of people, and the congregation agreed to do so. It happened that the event was the same week as the Listening Conference, and so the congregation was required to "rally" together to make both events happen successfully. The experience of doing so seemed to turn things around for the church. They could no longer maintain that they were helpless and stuck, because 600 people had been there and observed that they were not. Another, smaller event might not have been so compelling, but the evidence in this case could not be ignored. The congregation is getting well.

END NOTES

¹Martin E.P. Seligman, Helplessness: On Depression, Development, and Death (San Francisco: Freeman, 1974) p. 9.

² Ibid., p. 3.

³Ibid., pp. 98-99.

⁴Ibid., p. 40.

⁵Ibid., p. 37 and following.

⁶Ibid.

CHAPTER SIX

THE CARE OF CONGREGATIONS

The denominational executive has been entrusted with the spiritual oversight of the congregations in his or her area. This means responsibility to listen for the cry for help, to decode it and to respond. It means making available to congregations the resources or the individuals to offer the care that is needed when a congregation is in crisis. Congregations, along with clergy, are the denomination's most precious resource, and must be treated as such. While the response to the cry for help may not be exactly what the congregation had in mind when the request for aid was issued, some response must be made.

The Listening Conference is not the only method for responding to a request for help. It does, however, offer a short-term therapeutic relationship that has long-lasting results in the health of the congregation. It can be the turning point that moves a rigid, closed, blaming system towards becoming an open, invitational one. It can offer the helpless congregation an opportunity to experience success which gives rise to self esteem and feelings of mastery, which in turn eliminate the paralysis of helplessness. While it is not a new model, and has been used for years by

church consultants such as Lyle Schaller of the Yokefellow Institute, it has been developed in this project in connection with a Family Systems approach. This new twist has enabled the denominational executive to do more than offer program suggestions and "rearrange the furniture" in a closed system. It has made possible the beginning of an unbalancing of a closed system.

The concept of listening a congregation into health rather than talking it into health may seem unusual. Some reflections on this might be useful. Nelle Morton, feminist theologian and author, has developed some theological concepts which will be helpful here. She speaks of the need to "hear people into speech". This is over against the traditional concepts of speaking to people about freedom or liberation. She maintains that traditional emphasis on the Word has been an emphasis on the spoken word, not the heard word.

Could it be that the LOGOS deified reduces communication to a one-way relationship--that of speaking--and bypasses the far more radical divine aspect of hearing? Once such a possibility is entertained, and the biblical confession read from that perspective, is not one confronted by a pervasive Wisdom in the universe which LOGOS and its self-extensive technology seek to manipulate and control? That the more divine act is hearing to speech rather than speaking to speech? That the pervasive Wisdom or Transcendent One hears the Human Being to speech, and that word is the human's word, and the word heard into speech creates and announces new personhood--new consciousness awakened in the human being. ¹

In her work on the parables and on metaphor and theology, Sallie McFague also underscores the centrality and importance of hearing. In a discussion of the parable, she states:

... the setting of the parable is triangular. The components of the triangle are source or author (Jesus as narrator), the aesthetic object (the parable narrated), and the effect (the listeners to whom the parable is narrated). This triangle pattern points to the original situation of the parables: **Jesus told stories to people.** All three factors should operate in any analysis of the parables, for they cannot be abstracted from their source or from their listeners.²

These reflections on listening from two theologians help clarify the function of the consultants listening for the words of the faithful. While much of the history of Christianity and of the church has focused on speaking, it is becoming clear that listening has its own place in the realm of the sacred. Like a sermon preached to an empty church or into a tape recorder, the spoken word with no hearer seems futile and absurd. Rather than always saying "How shall they hear without a preacher?", Christendom might wish to ask "How shall we preach without a hearer?" A respect for the listener recognizes that hearing is at least as important as speech, and perhaps more so. The design of the Listening Conference recognizes that the hearing of the concerns and joys of the congregation in pain is more important than the words of the denominational executive.

The ministry of listening is also clarified by the work of Rom Harre'. Harre' has developed a theory of counseling for change that has included using the client or patient her/himself as one of the consultants in the treatment plan. Contrary to traditionalists who assume that the individual is incapable of knowing anything about him/herself, Harre' assumes that the client is one among many experts on his/her own behavior. The client is enlisted in the diagnostic stages and in the development of a treatment plan, which greatly increases the client's ownership of the entire process.³ In caring for congregations, this approach is particularly important if the congregation is a helpless one. Being an active part of the healing process, which is part of the design of the Listening Conference from the beginning, is extremely useful in moving beyond the paralysis of helplessness.

The importance of listening in caring for congregations is of theological as well as practical importance. The listener "hears the congregation into speech", to rephrase Morton, and gives credence to the congregation's own reflections about its life. This honors the integrity of the congregation and creates a collegial treatment style that unbalances a rigid system and offers a sense of competence and mastery to a helpless one. Listening is both a treatment plan and a sacred act.

By honoring the congregation's integrity, the listener invites rather than forces the congregation to confront and perhaps embrace the hazard of change. Caring is demonstrated by the denominational executive in the hearing of the cry for help, the response to that cry, the physical act of going to the place of pain and trouble, and the listening that occurs in that place. Change then can begin to be understood as a natural process rather than a threat to existence and future.

For the church to be the church, it must be open to the possibilities of the future, rather than closed off against the "hazards" of change. For the past two decades, much of the church has perceived change as a hazard, and has developed elaborate systems to avoid it. Part of the task of the denominational executive is to remove the protective covering and assist the congregation in developing some equipment to cope with change. Perhaps some congregations may even begin to relish change, rather than desperately fear it.

END NOTES

¹Nelle Morton, "Preaching the Word," in Alice L. Hagerman (ed.) Sexist Religion and Women in the Church: No More Silence (New York: Association Press, 1974) p.39.

²Sallie McFague, Speaking in Parables (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) p.73.

³Rom Harré and P. F. Secord, The Explanation of Social Behavior (Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams, 1973).

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